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ABSTRACT

This study examines the value of volunteering in preschools by members of the preschooler's family. Prior research has confirmed the benefits of parental involvement in children's education, particularly before the child is 6 years of age. Close contact between parent and teacher gives each a more complete picture of the child's abilities and improves consistency in working toward desired goals. In today's reality, the most significant adults in the lives of many children may be grandparents, aunts and uncles, or older brothers and sisters. The early childhood classroom provides the first opportunity for a family member to participate in a classroom setting. Volunteering is not mandated by the State Prekindergarten Program in Illinois, so it is important for families to understand the significance of volunteering in the classroom and the benefits it entails for the child. Other research on the benefits of parent involvement indicates that parents gain sensitivity to their child's needs and increased acceptance and enjoyment of their children. Children's intellectual success is enhanced, and they become stronger socially and emotionally. While some studies have found that family participation in school seems to affect children's self-esteem, self-discipline, mental health, and long-term aspiration, more research is needed. (SH)

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THE IMPORTANCE OF VOLUNTEERING IN A STATE PREKINDERGARTEN CLASSROOM

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As the first teachers of their children, parents have the primary responsibility for children's learning. Therefore, parents carry out their natural role as models for and helpers of their own children. Closer contact between parents and teachers will give each a more complete picture of the child's abilities and improve consistency in working toward desired goals. Also, the child will identify both the school and the home as places to learn, and parents and teachers as sources of learning.

In today's reality, family is a more encompassing term than is parent. The most significant adults in the lives of many children may be grandparents, aunts and uncles, or older brothers and sisters.

In an early childhood classroom, it is the first opportunity for a family member to participate in a classroom setting.

One of the components in the State Prekindergarten Program is parent involvement since, it is the belief that this promotes greater success for both the child and the family. Unfortunately, it is not mandatory for a family member to volunteer in the State Prekindergarten Program. It is of utmost importance, therefore, for families to gain knowledge of the significance of volunteering in the classroom and the benefits it entails for the child.

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Growth in a preschool childs' achievement is apparent when looking at individual child assessment profiles. When a child enters the program, the Chicago Early is administered to him. For the duration of the program, the staff informally evaluates the child in the following areas: cognitive, physical, language, fine and gross motor. Comparing the growth of achievement of preschool children with family volunteers to those without volunteers has been done in other studies. The results have been favorable in support of parent involvement in the classroom. There is a need to add to the state of knowledge on the value of volunteering. The information from this study will add to this state of knowledge. The data would be of importance to teachers, school administrators, project directors, families and communities interested in the value of family volunteering.

The need for close communication between home and school has long been recognized by early childhood educators (Honig, 1979). Parents know their children and have valuable information to share with teachers. Teachers are knowledgeable about child development and have experiences with young children, which makes them valuable resources for parents (Balaban, 1985). Both are primarily concerned with the optimal growth and development of the child, and this common interest makes parents and teachers important allies. The parent-teacher relationship should be built on mutual respect and a pooling of knowledge and information about

individual children and principals of child development (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1986)

Greenberg (1989) stated that parent's participation in the development and education of their children is not new in America. Before there was a public education system, Native American, immigrant American, and American slave families taught their offspring the knowledge, wisdom, and skills they themselves had. As the settlers settled, but before there were public schools, fortunate families hired tutors; towns hired teachers. Parents and representatives of their socio-economic and cultural group controlled their children's education, whether it took place at the child's home, at someone else's home, or in simple schools. Historically, educational opportunity has not been equal. Poorer communities were often denied excellent schools. As schools became professionalized, the people who started them were eased out.

A quarter of a century ago, research evidence confirming the benefits of parental involvement in children's education began to appear. Bloom (19) believed that if a child was to experience an enriched environment, it ought to be during the developmental period from birth to age eight. The concepts, attitudes, and ways of looking at the world that a child learns early in life will essentially remain with him. The things a child learns early in life, especially from his parents, are hard to change later on. A child reared in an environment of noncommunication may experience difficulty in

communicating. The enrichment of the child's life should be undertaken earlier than the age of six. The most compelling reason for wanting to involve parents in the early childhood classroom is the effect it has at this significant age.

Honig (1975) cited the importance of involving parents in early child care programs. Examples given are: Schaefer's (19) tutorial at-home model with low-income Washington, D.C., infants, Caldwell's (19) day care model at Syracuse, New York, and Bereiter-Engelmann's (19) model of pattern-drill lessons for low-income preschoolers. The conviction that parent involvement remains an indispensable ingredient for sustaining program accomplishments after a young child's participation in an early education program has led experts to affirm that "to work with children alone is to invite failure and frustration" (Biber, 1970, p. 67).

Ira Gordan (1969) has conceptualized parents possible involvement in early education at several different levels: 1) parents as an audience, 2) parents as a reference, 3) parents as the teacher of the child, 4) parents as volunteers in the classroom, 5) parents as paid aides, and 6) parents as participants in the decision-making process.

The interest in parent involvement, which manifested itself with concern over the child's intellectual development, was reinforced by the writings of Hunt, Bloom, and Coleman (1964). The time was ready for consideration of intervention and parent involvement. Research on the intervention results of the program, Head Start, showed that

parents were an important component in a child's development. Positive changes in parent behavior not only resulted in improved conditions for the child during the program but also continued after its completion. Adams (1976) found that in a Wisconsin community, 44% of the Head Start parents continued to serve in community organizations years after they were involved in the Head Start experience. This demonstrates a significant change in the life style of lower socio-economic status families. O'Keefe (1979) found parents spent more time on their children's education at home.

Increasing awareness of the role of the parent in the child's education is shown by the analysis of parental involvement in early education (Hess, 1970). Using parents as teachers aides and volunteers in the classroom suggested that their impact upon the child's development would be substantial.

Meier (1978) reported on benefits of parent participation for both parents and children. Parents who participated in an early education program gained a sensitivity to their child's emotional, social, intellectual development and needs; greater acceptance of their children; the ability to respect individual differences, a greater enjoyment of their children; an ability to sense and reduce their children's distress; more affection; use of more communication through reasoning and encouragement rather than through authority; development of parental educational goals; and effective use of community agencies. Meier reported that

children were 1) more aware and responsive 2) equipped with better skills for problem solving, 3) able to vocalize in early years and develop more complex language skills in second and third years, 4) more successful in both short-term and long-term intellectual development, and 5) stronger socially and emotionally with improved attachment to parents; there was also increased and richer interaction with mother and later, others.

The cause-effect relationship between student achievement and parental participation has consistently been strengthened by subsequent research findings. The annotated bibliography, The Evidence Grows (Henderson, 1981), reported 35 studies showing that various types of parental inclusion had positive results, including measurable gains in pupils' performance. A 1987 update, The Evidence Continues to Grow: Parental Involvement Improves Student Achievement (Henderson, 1987), summarizes 18 additional studies with similar findings.

Greenberg (1989), pointed out that family participation in schools seem to affect children's self-esteem, self-discipline, mental health, and long-term aspiration. When a member of a child's family takes part in his school life in a positive manner, even briefly and infrequently, the child's self-esteem appears to soar. The clearer it is to the young child through his parent's positive participation in his school world that his parents approve of it, the more the child is likely to respect his school world. The root of good

behavior (self-discipline) and school success (which also requires self discipline) is self-esteem. Part of children's self-esteem is derived from pride in their parents. Seeing their teacher's respect for their parents enhances the children's respect for them, hence their self-esteem. Self-esteem is a necessary ingredient in achievement. Achievement in prekindergarten is a sound basis for success in children's continuing years of education.

Research indicates that volunteering in the classroom has a positive effect on the achievement of prekindergarten age children. The exact amount of volunteering does not seem to be determined, nor the specific member involved who is doing the volunteering. Further research needs to be done considering the number of families unable to volunteer in the classroom due to their working schedules.

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